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Traditions and innovations in Late Middle Ages Bulgarian female head coverings

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Abstract: Four different female head coverings worn in Bulgaria in the 15th century are discussed: "turban", "proto-sokay", forehead adornment and reverse conical hat. The first one is probably a manner of head covering that was known before but changed and more widely spread in Bulgaria as a result from outside influences and from the removal of several borders. What is typical for it is that it was used both in former Byzantium territories and in the west. The second adornment is an innovation introduced by Western Europe; the third and the fourth ones come from the previous century. During this period, there is a greater percentage of traditional trends in this element of clothing than innovations. It can be seen that the Bulgarian territories were not isolated from the world outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The Bulgarian fashion followed trends that are typical for Europe.

Key words: female head coverings, 15th century, traditional trends, innovation, Ottoman Empire

Резюме: Разгледани са четири различни женски украси за глава, носени в България през XV в.: "тюрбан", "прото-сокай", прочелник и обратноконична шапка. Първата вероятно представлява видоизменен, познат от преди начин на забраждане, придобил по-широка употреба в България вследствие външни влияния и падане на някои граници. Характерно за него е, че е употребяван както по бившите византийски територии, така и на запад. Втората украса представлява новост, внесена от Западна Европа; третата и четвъртата са наследени от предишното столетие. Процентно през този период и в този елемент от облеклото традициите се оказват по-силни от иновациите. Видимо е, че българските територии не са изолирани от света извън границите на Османската империя. Модата при българските следва тенденции, характерни за цяла Европа.

There is a number of historical and ethnographic studies on the matter of the origin of complicated head coverings in the Bulgarian traditional clothing and they quite frequently refer it to the First Bulgarian Empire.¹ Alongside the appearance, special attention is given to the semantics of the basic elements.² Without underrating this approach, in this article the topic will be considered from a visual point of view and the focus selected is on the 15th century – the period in which Bulgaria gradually became a part of the Ottoman Empire³ and therefore Bulgarian traditions and identity suffered a setback. At such a time, that is crucial for both politics and economy, it may be expected that there would be a complete change in manners and in people's appearance.

There are detailed illustrations of the costume of the Second Bulgarian Empire which could be combined with archeological and written data. The combination of the different sources of information allows for several types of female head coverings to be distinguished, such as high and low hats, forehead adornment (*prochelnik*) and textile coverings.⁴ There are data for part of them that point that they have been inherited from older times. The evolution of the forehead adornment, especially, may be traced in details from a diadem-torque to a combination of various types of metal elements.⁵ The Renaissance impact on the costume can also be seen at the end of the Second Bulgarian Empire.⁶

The depictions from the 15th century are not so numerous but, even so, we have the wall paintings in the Dragalevski and Kremikovski monasteries⁷ (respectively от 1476 and 1493),⁸ which are valuable not only because of the portraits of *ktitors* /donors/ but also because of the contemporary details in scenes from everyday life. When examining them in a chronological order and starting with the portraits as more

¹ See a summary of opinions on this topic at Chokoev 2006, 84–89.

² Nikolova 1980.

³ Here the hypothesis of P. Pavlov that Vidin, Bulgaria, existed until 1422 is adopted - Pavlov 2006.

⁴ Atanasova 2016.

⁵ Grigorov 2003, 36; Pavlova 2006; Grigorov 2007, 76–80.

⁶ Naslednikova 1974, 45–49.

⁷ I would like to thank Dr. Ivan Chokoev for the photos of these monasteries made by him and kindly given to me.

⁸ The dating is based on Vasiliev 1960, 58–66. Of course, these are not the only wall paintings from the 15th century that have been preserved, but they are of essential value for this topic. Others will also be mentioned in this text.

trustworthy, four types of female head coverings in this period may be differentiated:

A. Turban: The name is provisional. It refers to the head adornment of *ktitorissa* Vida, wife of Radoslav Mavar, in her portrait in Dragalevtsi Monastery (fig. 1).⁹ The portrait is not well-preserved but the folds of the white textile wrapped around her head and the covering on the neck and shoulders are distinct. It can be seen that Vida does not wear any earrings or other jewelry.

Textile head coverings that resemble turbans have a long history in Byzantium being introduced through borderland regions such as Cappadocia and gradually conquering the capital.¹⁰ Bulgarians had known about them at least since the 12th century through the contact zone in Kastoria (fig. 2) and some local sources also evidence their use. Even so, the turban is not depicted in an official Bulgarian portrait¹¹ in the 13th and 14th centuries. Analyzing the works of the Kastoria art circle in the 15th-16th centuries, Tsveta Valeva and some authors, cited by her, posit that the female head coverings of the supporting characters in the scene *The Birth of Christ* are typical realistic elements from the local life in this circle.¹² A group of nativity scenes from the Kremikovski and Poganov Monasteries, the Holy Monastery of Transfiguration of Jesus in Meteora and the church of the nun Eupraxia in Kastoria (fig. 3)¹³ is juxtaposed with a group of donor's portraits from the regions of Kastoria, Skopje and Nish. In a chronological order these are: the unknown *ktitorissa* of Dolna Kamenitsa (the beginning of the 14th century); Valka depicted in Saint Spas Church in Leskoets dated back to 1461/1462; Militsa of the Matka Monastery (1496/1497) and finally Vladislava from the St. Nickolas Magaliou church in Kastoria (before 1505) (fig. 4). Vida's

⁹ Vasiliev 1960, 58.

¹⁰ Ball 2006, 57.

¹¹ Some visual resemblance can be seen in the white covering of one of Ivan Aleksander's daughters in miniature painting 2 of the *Manasses' Chronicle* (scanned in the digital collection of the Vatikan library <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.slav.2>, access 22.09.2023). The face is again surrounded by a white cloth and there is a horizontal voluminous object around the forehead. However, this figure is in the background and has few details, so no solid conclusion may be made on its basis.

¹² Valeva 2006, 299–303. See also Kuneva 2017 about Kastoria as one of the main art centers in the Balkans at the end of the 15th – early 16th century and about the painter teams travelling within the borders of the Ottoman Empire during this period.

¹³ Out of the listed wall paintings, here we discuss only those in which the head coverings are the same.

portrait looks like it belongs to both groups but the portrait from Dolna Kamenitsa is different. It is not only earlier than the rest, but also contains more elements that are both more colourful and more expensive. If we are to suggest the existence of a relationship, this would mean that in the 15th century an original and beautiful head adornment underwent a significant decline.

However, analogues of Vida's turban are not found only on the Balkan peninsular. A series of Netherland drawings contain the same head adornment (fig. 5). The hats, similar to turbans, entered Western Europe in 1400 sometimes as simple rolls of cloth,¹⁴ and they were very much in trend after Constantinople was defeated and looted in 1453 and they kept being fashionable all over Europe until the end of the century.¹⁵ In spite of the eastern origin of the turban, the portrait in Dragalevtsi Monastery may depict not only a local but a common European tendency. It is possible that the similarity to the hat from Dolna Kamenitsa (which is an isolated case) is random and wearing the otherwise familiar turban was a new practice for the remainders of the Bulgarian aristocracy in the 15th century, that was adopted only after it conquered Western Europe. It is interesting that no turbans can be seen in Serbian portraits from the 14th century but in 1568 in Studenitsa the Serbian princess consort – saint Ana Nemanich was depicted with a nun's covering which is an almost exact copy of Vida's one.

B. Proto-Sokay: the name is provisional in honour of the thesis of Krastyu Miyatev about the *sokay* originating from the *bolyars* in Veliko Tarnovo.¹⁶ The adornment was worn by Teodora, the wife of the *ktitor* of Kremikovski Monastery, on a wall painting dating back to 1493¹⁷ and, in a simpler form, by the maidservant in the scene of the Virgin Mary's birth in the same monastery (fig. 6). A more intricate adornment, in comparison to Vida's turban, can be seen. There are expensive *naushnitsi* /temple rings/, decorative needles and embroidery but what is the most impressive is the solid base that rises at an angle to the head, similar to a halo. Its outline really resembles the Tarnovo/Gabrovo type of *sokay* with its typical oval board, even though the metal diadem and the vertical embroidery on the covering are missing. According to

¹⁴ Kelly & Schwabe 2007, 105.

¹⁵ Norris 1999, 444.

¹⁶ Miyatev 1950.

¹⁷ Vasiliev 1960, 63.

available art sources depicting head adornments on the Balkans in the 14th century, this design does not have an older analogue.

The style and iconography of the frescoes in the Kremikovski Monastery are so different from the other preserved Bulgarian paintings dating back to the 14th century, that some hypotheses (cited and refuted by)¹⁸ posit that Romanian patterns were used when making them. Virgil Vătăşianu even deciphers the *ktitor's* inscription as “Rad Voevod” and states that the *ktitor* is the future Romanian ruler Radu the Great. In support of this, he points out that there are similarities between the clothing of Theodora and the clothing of the *ktitors'* wives in the churches of Dolheştii Mari, Saint Nicholas church in Bălineşti (Suceava) and the Arbore Church.¹⁹ The identification has been convincingly disproved by Stamen Mihaylov. However, the proto-sokay indeed has detailed analogues on the territory of Medieval Moldova. The most precise ones of them, however, have been dated to a time that is a bit later than the time of creation of the frescoes on the walls of Kremikovski Monastery: the lady from the Arbore Church (1502/2) and Anastasiya and Teodosiya from Umor Monastery (1530) (fig. 7).²⁰

Similarly to the turban case, there is a series of western parallels from the same time period. Ekaterina Manova gives examples from the Flemish region, Italy, Germany and England.²¹ Netherland could also be added (fig. 8). At first sight, the three samples mentioned here do not look that much alike Theodora because of the lack of veil. However, there is a connecting link – an etching from the travel notes of Jean Chesneau of 1547 depicts Bulgarians meeting a caravan and one villager has the same “halo” around her head and no kerchief on it (fig. 9).²² A Muslim connection may also be allowed when talking about this period but it is difficult to find one even though Ottoman Empire ladies obviously also liked interesting hats (fig. 10).²³

¹⁸ Mihaylov 1960.

¹⁹ Mihaylov 1960, 26.

²⁰ Only the fresco in Dolheştii Mari is earlier but the hat depicted is of a very different style.

²¹ Manova 1962, 61. Examples from all over Europe are illustrated on the website “Bloshka” <<http://bloshka.info/2020/10/20/swirling-hat/>>, access 17.09.2023 where this type of hats are called “Swirling hats”.

²² Stoyanova – Serafimova 1979, 27.

²³ In general, it is difficult to discover reliable depictions of Turkish women from the 15th century and this is why here are given examples from the next century as well.

The 15th century in the Western Europe is a period in which female head adornments were in a flourishing state; never before or after did they have such fantastic shapes. Different types of hats sometimes appeared every ten years.²⁴ Having this background information, it is difficult to discover the origin of the exotic element discussed herein. Yet, in contrast to the Moldovian sources, quite a few of the Western ones are dated earlier than the fresco in the Kremikovski Monastery. It should be accepted that this is not a matter of influence from Moldova to Bulgaria, but of western influence which reached the Bulgarian territories and the Principality of Moldova at approximately the same time.

The western influence on art transformed into a consciously-sought style in Bulgaria around the middle of the 13th century is a result from the founding of the Latin Empire and the establishment of free trade connections with Central and Western Europe. At the same time, western elements appeared in the clothing and accessories of the aristocrats.²⁵ These influences continued during the following century, being more eminent in male clothing and separate motifs were introduced in female clothing. In the 15th century, oriental innovations can be seen in the Bulgarian garment. The depictions in the Kremikovski Monastery, however, show that the more conservative female costume was still influenced by the west even after the Ottoman invasion. And the etching of Chesneau is evidence that the *proto-sokay* was used by all strata of society – the women welcoming the caravan are obviously on a much lower social level than Theodora. It may be additionally stated that at least in the east this specific accessory was clearly worn by married women; in the Kremikovski Monastery and in the church of Saint Nicola in Balineshti, where mothers are depicted together with their young daughters, only the mothers wear a *proto-sokay*.

C. Forehead adornment / *Prochelnik*: depicted in the Kremikovski Monastery on the forehead of Dragana, the *ktitor's* daughter and on one of the handmaids in the scene of the Birth of Christ (fig. 11). Its use is also confirmed by an archeological finding in Cherven dated back to the end of the 14th century/the first half of the 15th century. This is a broad ribbon of red silk and gold-thread tied at the

²⁴ Norris 1999, 359.

²⁵ Grabar 1924, 26; Sotirov 1992, 347.

nape of the woman buried in grave No. 36.²⁶ The *prochel'nik* is one of the most widely spread adornments on the Bulgarian territories from the period of the First Bulgarian Empire and it was worn by all strata of society, with only a little change in its shape and model in time. As it continued to be used in the following centuries, its presence in the 15th century does not need to be commented on.

D. Reverse conical hat: The most often used bolyar's hat of the 14th century is drawn on the heads of the tsaritsa and princess in the scene *Saint George Kills the Dragon* in the Kremikovski Monastery (fig. 12). Each woman has a white kerchief, therefore it is impossible that the artist wanted to depict a crown. For comparison, a tsaritsa's crown can be seen on the head of Saint Elena in the Kremikovski Monastery and on the heads of Saint Elena and Saint Nedelya in Sveti Dimitar Church in Boboshevo²⁷ – it has a clearly distinguished hexagonal shape and is placed on a maphorion. The drawing of legendary characters is not sufficiently reliable evidence of the real use of the reverse conical hat but the same was also depicted, in a simpler style, on the head of a village woman in the etching in the above-mentioned travel notes of Jean Chesneau of 1547. The description of hats “similar to big and deep plates” and “tower-like” can be found in other travel notes of the 16th century.²⁸ In their totality, these sources suggest that the reverse conical hat was still in use in the 15th century and probably lost its popularity to the new types of head coverings. In the 16th – 17th centuries, it was made from progressively simpler materials.²⁹

According to the available data from the 15th century, the use of four very different hats/head adornments may be confirmed with a high degree of certainty. The first type is probably an adornment that was known before, having an Eastern origin, that was a bit changed and more widely used in Bulgaria as a result from outside influence and the fall of some borders. What is typical for it is that in the Late Middle Ages it was used in the former Byzantium territories and in the west. The second one is a novelty introduced by Western Europe; the third and fourth ones

²⁶ Chokoev 2006, 29–30.

²⁷ The frescoes in Boboshevo can be seen on the website Medieval Churches in Bulgaria <<https://medchurches.livejournal.com/20660.html>>, access 10.09.2023

²⁸ Stoyanova-Serafimova 1979, 17–20.

²⁹ Stoyanova-Serafimova 1979, 27.

have local origins, they were inherited from the previous centuries. As a percentage the traditions prove to have a stronger influence than the innovations in this period and on this element of clothing. What is remarkable is that the innovations themselves don't have an oriental character which would be easy to explain and is expected. Specifically in women's head coverings it can be seen that the Bulgarians do not lose contact with the world outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire. The fashion in women's head adornments follows the trends typical all over Europe.

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

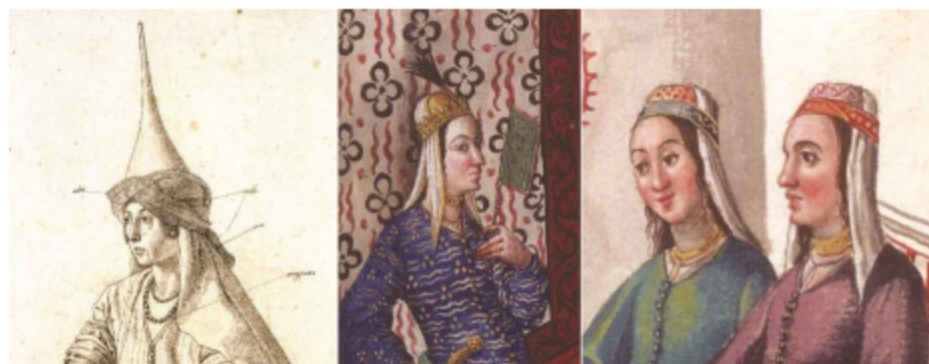


Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12